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News Release

The full article can be seen at http://newscenter.nmsu.edu/Articles/view/11328/nmsu-joins-state-agencies-in-four-corners-emergency-response-to-gold-king-mine-spill

CUTLINE: A water truck delivers water to a garden in San Juan County after the Gold King Mine spill caused irrigation ditches to be closed. NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service spearheaded the response to agricultural producers' needs for water for irrigated crops, and hay and water for livestock in the affected areas along the Animas and San Juan rivers. (NMSU photo by Bonnie Hopkins)

Full-size Image

NMSU joins state agencies in Four Corners emergency response to Gold King Mine spill

DATE: 08/17/2015
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FARMINGTON – When three million gallons of mining sludge from the Gold King Mine site at Silverton, Colorado, flowed downriver in the Animas and San Juan rivers, area emergency response teams jumped into action.

As the plume worked its way through the Four Corners region of New Mexico, New Mexico State University, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, New Mexico Environment Department and New Mexico State Engineer's office personnel addressed the short- and long-term impacts of heavy metal contamination of river water and soil along the contaminated rivers.

"There are three stages of an incident," said Jeff Witte, New Mexico Secretary of Agriculture. "The incident, the emergency response and the recovery."

The incident has required multiple parts of NMSU's system to come together and address some important agricultural questions.

"NMSU's College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences has been deeply involved with working with real people facing a real problem in San Juan County. Faculty members are also working closely with state agencies involved in the response," said Jim Libbin, interim dean of the college.

Within hours of the incident passing through San Juan County, NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service was organizing emergency response when irrigation water diversion from the river was stopped.

Bonnie Hopkins, San Juan County Extension agricultural agent; faculty members Kevin Lombard and Mick O'Neill at the Agricultural Science Center at Farmington; and plant and environmental sciences professor April Ulery at NMSU's Las Cruces campus are in the middle of the emergency response effort.

"Bonnie Hopkins, who is a member of the county's emergency response team, is spearheading efforts to protect the agricultural producers' investments by addressing the agricultural needs impacted by the water," said Jon Boren, NMSU Cooperative Extension Service director.

Hopkins mobilized livestock relocation, water delivery for livestock and crops, and hay delivery for livestock. Other NMSU Extension agents from across the state provided manpower and logistical assistance.

She also organized ditch riders, irrigators and producers, providing a forum for updates on water and exchange of information about ditches' conditions from producers themselves.

Complex questions that require time or data to answer were relayed from the NMSU faculty in the field to NMDA personnel at the emergency response Department Operation Center. NMDA then linked with NMSU professors and researchers in Las Cruces to gather and interpret the relevant scientific information.

"The goal was to determine the risks, if any, that come with using the river water to irrigate crops or water cattle," said Katie Goetz, NMDA public information officer. "The information NMSU produced was distilled into easy-to-understand fact sheets that were shared with the Extension personnel as they communicated with the affected farmers and ranchers."

Ulery, whose expertise includes soil and restoration of ecology, led the Las Cruces contingency during the emergency response.

Meanwhile, the assessment began of the risks from heavy metal contaminants flowing in the spill.

The State Engineer's office personnel directed obtaining irrigation ditch sediment samples for all ditches serviced by the contaminated rivers to determine if heavy metal contaminants are present.

The state environment department began testing the water and soil. A mobile lab was established to test residential well water.

NMSU faculty member Lombard joined that effort by taking soil samples under the state's environment department protocol for testing to determine if contaminants have been transferred by water to land adjacent to the rivers.

When officials declare the river water to be safe, NMSU will continue to be involved. Research faculty are organizing to study the long-term impact of the mining sludge spill to help the residents of San Juan County and the Four Corners region to recover from the Gold King Mine spill.

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